

INTERFAITH INSIGHTS

A Michigan message: making 'interfaith' operational

Note: In 2012, *MLive.com* was a partner in the Year of Interfaith Understanding. The success of that project led to an ongoing effort to build interfaith dialogue in Michigan. This column is one such effort.



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David Ford's visit to Grand Rapids last week brought a heightened sense of the importance of interfaith engagement as we seek peace in a world that too often is seen in terms of conflict and violence. Ford, regius professor of divinity at Cambridge University, has been a world

leader in interfaith endeavors, including in his role as founder of the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme. He was the speaker for the first annual Interfaith Leadership Dinner, where the Rev. Richard Rhem was given the Sylvia Kaufman Interfaith Leadership award.

His discussion built on the Muscat Manifesto we reviewed in last week's column, but he went on to present a "Michigan Message" that dealt with some of the

more operational aspects of interfaith leadership. His nine-point agenda put forth practical ways to enhance or expand interfaith efforts in our communities.

Sustained interfaith efforts require each participant to develop a vision and rationale from the standpoint of one's own tradition. It is not just something nice to do; it must have a deep rationale within one's own faith understanding. As a Christian, Ford said interfaith engagement flows from his understanding of God as the creator who loves each person in that creation. Interfaith dialogue thus is not a dilution of one's faith but

flows from the center of that faith and, in fact, deepens it.

His Michigan Message also focused on practical matters, including keeping interfaith involvement as a priority on one's calendar. If it is not scheduled on a regular basis, it will not get done and will not be considered important. Successful efforts require time commitments and financial support. Our priorities can be seen in how we spend our time and how we spend our money.

Interfaith engagement involves sustained long-term relationships with those of other faiths. Such relationships lead to a deeper

understanding of the other, a deeper understanding of one's own faith and a deeper commitment to the common good. While individual commitment is important, Ford emphasized the importance of building up interfaith institutions and organizations: local, national and international. It begins with individuals who have the vision, but to be sustained, it requires the development of institutions that carry the mission.

In addition to his roles at Cambridge University, Ford also was one of the founders of the practice of Scriptural Reasoning, in which persons of different traditions come

together to share in a common reading of each other's scripture. The goal is to be better informed about the other person and his or her relationship to scripture. As Ford put it, there will be disagreements, but let's seek a more "intelligent level of disagreement." He compared it to a good marriage. It is not the absence of disagreement but a more informed and considerate level of disagreement.

We have introduced Scriptural Reasoning a few times in Grand Rapids. If you would like to participate in this practice, please email interfaith@gvsu.edu.